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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAGUA 001103

SIPDIS
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PASS TO AMCONSUL QUEBEC
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE

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SUBJECT: Nicaraguans Successfully March Against Ortega

REF: MANAGUA 1091

MANAGUA 00001103 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: RobertJ.Callahan, Ambassador, State, US Embassy
Managua; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Despite the governing Sandinista National Liberation Front's (FSLN) tactics to suppress marcher turnout, on November 21 civil society and the opposition successfully gathered approximately 25,000 participants to protest President Daniel Ortega's authoritarian manner of governance. The FSLN's activity the same day also brought thousands of supporters to Managua, but gathered far fewer than the governing party expected. A major factor leading to the opposition's massive demonstration was the police's ability to provide security throughout Nicaragua. Nonetheless, there were violent confrontations between the two groups on the roads from Managua back to the departments, which resulted in one death. End Summary.

Despite FSLN Tactics, Civil Society/Opposition March a Success

¶2. (C) Exceeding expected numbers, Nicaragua's civil society and opposition parties gathered a crowd of thousands from across the country to protest the one-year anniversary of the November 2008 municipal electoral fraud and Ortega's re-election efforts. Local media reported that Nicaraguan military intelligence estimated 25,000 participants. The crowd included the 18 civil society organizations that comprise the Citizens' Union for Democracy (UCD) as well as all major opposition parties. Political and civil society leaders that participated included former President Arnoldo Aleman, National Assembly Deputy and former presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre, former presidential candidate Edmundo Jarquin, and the president of the Higher Council of the Private Sector (COSEP) Jose Adan Aguerri. The crowd also included prominent figures from the FSLN's government of the 1980s, such as former Supreme Court Chief Judge Alejandro Serrano.

¶3. (C) According to Enrique Saenz, president of the opposition Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), the FSLN miscalculated in believing that The FSLN Rally - Large Presence, but Good Turnout?

¶4. (C) What was initially planned as a competing countermarch to the UCD protest ultimately morphed into an Ortega-fest at a different time as Police Provide Security for Marches, but Some Violence Erupts

¶5. (C) On November 21, Police Commissioner Aminta Granera demonstrated that her institution is capable of functioning properly and protecting citizens' basic rights. Approximately 7,000 police across Nicaragua provided security the day of the marches. In Managua, 3,000 police cordoned-off the march routes, controlled the major rotundas, and provided buffer zones between competing marches. Outside Managua, 4,000 police provided security on the roads to Managua and escorted caravans coming to the capital for the march. Leaders of civil society and opposition parties acknowledged the police's positive work in providing a safe environment for the protest (in contrast to several recent security debacles, reftel).

¶6. (C) While the marches in Managua took place without any major incident, there were confrontations between the governing FSLN and the Liberals when the opposition caravans were returning to their departments from Managua. One incident occurred near Ciudad Dario in the department of Matagalpa (approximately 90 km northeast of Managua). According to a traveler in the opposition caravan, FSLN sympathizers ambushed the opposition buses and fired arms, "morteros" (improvised projectile devices), and threw rocks. The Liberals responded with rocks and morteros. The ensuing exchange of rocks resulted in the death of one FSLN supporter and several injured. A similar incident occurred on the road from Managua to Leon. A traveler on one of the buses to Leon told us that the FSLN buses blocked the opposition caravan, sprayed the Liberal buses with pepper spray, and threw rocks at the opposition members. This resulted in several injuries, including an opposition councilmember from a municipality in the department of Chinandega.

Comment

¶7. (C) The civil society and opposition march was a resounding success and surpassed all expectations in bringing approximately 25,000 Nicaraguans to protest President Ortega's government. Likewise, Police Commissioner Granera showed at last that she was capable of leading a national police that protects citizens' basic rights. This was a needed shot in the arm to both the opposition and the police, but the question now becomes whether civil society and the opposition can sustain this unity effort to defend the country's democratic space and whether the police can continue functioning in a non-partisan manner.

¶8. (C) The FSLN's actions on November 21 also raise questions. The lower than expected turnout at the FSLN's activity suggests that all might not be well in the governing party. Additionally, since Ortega's party in the past has demonstrated its ability (and will) to violently suppress the freedom of expression, it is unclear exactly why Ortega allowed this massive protest march. As mentioned earlier, different political leaders attribute Ortega's

actions to miscalculation or to domestic and international pressure. Regardless of the reason, the common belief is that while Ortega allowed the opposition march, he is not likely to change his authoritarian tendencies.

CALLAHAN